

12/ 2427

4016a

AN

E S S A Y

ON THE

FOLLY OF SCEPTICISM, &c.

A most admirable per-
formance indeed. see
Month: Rev: LXXVII, 571-7.



A N
E S S A Y
O N T H E
FOLLY OF SCEPTICISM;

T H E
ABSURDITY OF DOGMATIZING ON
RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS;

A N D T H E
Proper MEDIUM to be observed between
these TWO EXTREMES.

To which the GOLD MEDAL of the TEYLERIAN
SOCIETY at HAARLEM was adjudged
April 8th, 1786.

By W. L. BROWN, D. D.

A N D
MINISTER of the ENGLISH CHURCH at UTRECHT.

Dum vitant stulti vitia in contraria currunt.

HOR. Serm. Lib. i. 2.

L O N D O N :
PRINTED FOR J. MURRAY, NO. 32, FLEET-STREET;
AND W. CREECH, EDINBURGH.

M DCCLXXXVIII.



INTRODUCTION.

I REMEMBER to have read somewhere in Plato, that every thing arises from its contrary. This observation struck me, at the time, as paradoxical and extravagant ; and I classed it among those fanciful notions for which that elegant and sublime Philosopher is frequently distinguished. Subsequent reflection, however, and the observations I have since made upon both men and things, have convinced me that, though paradoxical, it is far from being groundless ; and that, the more

vi INTRODUCTION.

we examine the Natural and Moral World, the more we shall be convinced of its justness and solidity.

Cast your eyes over the wide compass of Nature, you behold vicissitudes and revolutions following in quick succession, and contraries springing up and balancing each other, with unvarying exactness; till, from seeming discordance, universal order and harmony are produced.

In the Moral World, in every sphere of human action, the case is the same. That one extreme produces

produces another, is true even to a proverb. Fatigue leads to repose; violent passion often subsides into a calm. Prodigality often impels to avarice. Pride is the fore-runner of humiliation; Licentiousness terminates commonly in despotism; and Oppression has often been the parent of Liberty: and so in a variety of instances, which it is needless, and would be tedious, to enumerate.

Unhappily for the world, this truth is too clearly established by experiment. For, men are com-

viii INTRODUCTION.

monly in extremes, and seldom in that middle point where Truth and Justice reside. Even when they have got into the right path, and have some laudable object in view, their intemperate eagerness in the pursuit, carries them greatly beyond the point they proposed to reach on their first setting out. Nay, I do not know by what fatality it happens, that the more laudable the pursuit is, the more of this intemperance, which is the greatest bar to success, and the less of that prudence and moderation, which are its grand instruments,

struments, are often to be found. As in the case of a chariot which catches fire from excessive rapidity, the mind is often enflamed with an ardour which consumes its energy, and disappoints its expectations. It would seem as if people had determined to prove how much their practice could contradict their profession, and how exactly their want of judgment in the pursuit, was proportioned to the importance of the object.

In nothing more than in the extremes of Scepticism and Dogmatism

X INTRODUCTION.

matism has this propensity of mankind to exceed, been evinced.



These have divided between them a great extent of philosophical and religious ground ; and, by their tares, have almost constantly choked the rich crops they would otherwise have produced. When I mention Philosophy, however, I should chiefly confine myself to Metaphysics and Morality ; for, in other sciences, these excesses have been less frequent ; and, accordingly, greater improvements have been made. But, in Metaphysics, in Morals, and in Religion,

Religion, what extravagant contrarieties do we behold !

On the one hand, men believe without evidence, trust without discernment, and maintain without moderation. The clearest and the most doubtful, the most reasonable and the most absurd propositions meet equally with their assent, provided they have been handed down from remote ages, or have obtained a currency in the world. With them, an opinion once adopted must never be changed ; and every opinion must be adopted, which has been
established

established by prescription, and is hung round with awful and sacred trappings.

With a view to avoid this unmanly and pernicious excess, others run directly into the opposite. They object to the plainest and simplest truths, doubt where there is no ambiguity, and suspect where there is no fraud. They refuse to assent, but upon the strictest demonstration; overturn every principle upon which demonstration can be built; reason themselves out of common sense; and, under pretence of arriving

arriving at knowledge, involve themselves more and more in ignorance.

Thus, while many are straining every nerve to sanction and perpetuate Error and Superstition under the appearance of Truth and Piety, others are equally active in undermining Religion and Truth under the appearance of Error and Superstition. Both are equally extravagant and foolish; and, between them, the cause of Virtue and of Truth, and, together with it, the happiness of mankind, are continually receiving

XIV INTRODUCTION.

receiving fresh wounds; from which great pains and patience will hardly recover them.

It were greatly to be wished, that some adequate remedy could be provided for this evil; and that those branches of knowledge, which are both the sublimest and most useful (I mean, those which have for their objects the human intellect, the conduct of human life, and the perfections and worship of the Supreme Being), were, at least, put upon the same footing with others, and allowed freely to exert their natural energies, unconfin'd

unconfined by the fetters of spiritual tyranny, and unembarrassed by the quibbles of sophistical captiousness. The chief obstruction to this desirable effect has arisen from the two extremes we propose to treat of in this Essay. To remove this obstruction, therefore, one principal step will evidently be, to contribute to the exploding of these extremes by evincing their folly.

Relying, therefore, on the candour and indulgence of our Readers, we purpose, in our First Part, to exhibit the folly of Scepticism
in

XVI INTRODUCTION.

in different views: in our Second, to point out the absurdity of dogmatizing on religious subjects: in our last, to endeavour to state the proper medium to be observed between these two extremes. Each of these Parts shall be subdivided into Sections, which will unfold themselves in the course of the Work, according to the branches of the subject of which they treat.

CON-

CONTENTS.

	Page
INTRODUCTION -	v

PART I.

Of the Folly of Scepticism.

SECTION I.

<i>Rise and Progress of Scepticism</i>	2
--	---

SECTION II.

<i>Of the different Kinds of Scepticism</i>	23
---	----

xviii C O N T E N T S.

SECTION III.

	Page
<i>General Observations on the Nature and Genius of Scepticism</i> -	35

SECTION IV.

<i>Of the Folly of Scepticism, consi- dered with Regard to its Causes</i>	47
---	----

SECTION V.

<i>Of Scepticism, considered in Rela- tion to its Objects</i> -	62
---	----

SECTION VI.

<i>Of Scepticism, considered in its Ef- fects on the Minds of its Profes- sors</i> -	73
--	----

C O N T E N T S. xix

P A R T II.

Of the Absurdity of Dogmatism on religious Subjects.

SECTION I.

Page

Of the different Significations of

Dogmatism

- 103

SECTION II.

That Dogmatism is founded in Pre-

sumption, and leads to Injustice 112

SECTION III.

That Dogmatism obstructs religious

Improvement, nay, destroys the

very Essence of Religion - 121

XX C O N T E N T S.

SECTION IV.

	Page
<i>That Dogmatism has produced all the Corruptions which have dis- graced Christianity</i>	135

P A R T III.

Of the Medium to be observed
between the Extremes of Scep-
ticism and Dogmatism in Reli-
gion.

SECTION I.

<i>Of the proper Meaning of the Question</i>	161
--	-----

SECTION II.

<i>Of the Medium between Scepticism and Dogmatism with Regard to ourselves</i>	163
--	-----

C O N T E N T S. xxi

SECTION III.

	Page
<i>Of the Means of discouraging both a Sceptical and Dogmatical Spi- rit in the World</i> -	171

CONCLUSION.

<i>Some Reflections tending to facili- tate the Observance of the Medi- um above recommended</i> -	184
--	-----

CONSTITUTION

SECTION III.

Page

Of the Means of Encouraging
a Steady and Vigorous
Trade in the World

CONCLUSION

10 FEB 58

A N

E S S A Y, &c.

P A R T I.

A N



A N
E S S A Y, &c.

P A R T I.

Of the Folly of Scepticism.

I N order to behold, in the clearest light, the folly of Scepticism, it will be proper to give some historical account of its rise and progress; to state its various complexions and classes; to ascertain its general nature; to consider the principles in the human mind from which it springs—the

B objects

objects it has in view—the effects with which it is probably, or actually attended. Having, thus, obtained clear and distinct notions of its ingredients and qualities, we hope it will be acknowledged to be foolish in the extreme.

SECTION I.

Rise and Progress of Scepticism.

AS from the Greeks all Philosophy has been derived, so, from them likewise proceeded the abuses of Philosophy, and the evils they occasion. It is well known that, when Socrates arose, the province of philosophizing

Sophizing was entirely occupied by the Sophists—a set of men whose presumption could be equalled only by their ignorance. Filled with indignation at their arrogance, and desirous of advancing the interests of Truth and Virtue, that great Philosopher set himself to oppose them. For this purpose, he adopted a method the very reverse of what they pursued. He pretended to affirm nothing himself, proposed questions for their solution, reduced them on many occasions to insuperable difficulties, and obliged them to confess themselves ignorant of what they vainly boasted they knew to the bottom. By his own modesty, and their embarrass-

B 2

ment,

ment, he wanted to establish the necessity of inquiry and investigation, before opinions or systems were adopted. He was so far, however, from aiming to establish that universal doubt which posterior philosophers inculcated, that, with regard to the most important branch of Philosophy, viz. the science of Morals (to which he chiefly directed his attention), he laid down, and maintained, the most positive and invariable precepts.

The principle, nevertheless, which he adopted as the guide to sound knowledge (and which, when properly limited, is, without doubt, of singular utility) viz. conviction of the weakness of the human intellect, was
pushed

pushed to a most extravagant length by many of those Philosophers who gave distinction to the Schools derived more immediately from his. Plato, his disciple, though far from sceptical in the general tenour of his philosophy, yet seemed frequently to favour uncertainty, by defending both sides of a question, and leaving it at last undecided. But this abuse was carried to the greatest degree of extravagance by the Middle Academy, founded by Arcesilaus, whose grand principle was, that both Reason and Sense were delusive, and that true Philosophy consisted in embracing no opinion, but in being equally diffident of all.

Into these sceptical principles the Philosophers of this School * seem to have been led, not only by the abuse of the Socratic principle of the necessity of Doubt in cases where evidence is not sufficiently full or clear, but also in imitation of Pyrrho, of the Eleatic School, who flourished about the time the Middle Academy was established, and founded the Sceptic sect, so called from the Greek word *σνεπτομαι* (to *speculate*) and by his singular acuteness and eloquence had widely disseminated his opinions.

It is well known to what a fatal degree he extended Scepticism, not on-

* See Brukeri Hist. Phil. Vol. I. De Acad. Med.

ly denying the existence of Truth, but taking away all difference of right and wrong, virtue and vice, and referring all moral distinctions to the arbitrary institutions of civil governors, and to the mere considerations of utility and convenience.

To any one, however, who considers, with attention, the steps by which this pretended Philosopher was led to embrace and inculcate such extravagant opinions, it will be evident that they are to be referred to the same causes which operated in the Middle Academy. Pyrrho had been frequently pressed by the cavils and sophisms of the Logicians, and thought that the readiest method of getting

rid of their objections, and humbling their arrogance, was to deny the principles on which their reasonings were founded, and to assert the universal obscurity in which the human mind was involved. He perceived, at the same time, that the differences of sentiment among the Dogmatists were so great and so multiplied, that it was difficult either to reconcile them, or to discover Truth amidst so much discordance and confusion. As the best method, therefore, of securing composure of mind, he chose the profession of absolute Indifference; and carried it along with him into common life to that degree, that he avoided no danger in his way, and

was

was frequently preserved only by the vigilance of his friends.

A doctrine, however, so ridiculous, and fraught with such consequences, could not fail to attract the indignation, not only of those against whose tenets it was particularly levelled, but of every wise and good man. He was, accordingly, obliged to observe some moderation and decency, and, at last, to take shelter under the wings of the Middle and New Academies; whose reputation, owing to the great abilities of many of their Teachers, was better established, though their principles were, at bottom, pretty much the same.

Hence,

Hence, if we except Sextus Empiricus, famous for his *Pyrrhonian Institutions*, we meet with hardly any Philosopher of note who made open profession of Scepticism, from the time of Ænesidemus, down to that period when all the other Schools of Philosophy were absorbed by that of Alexandria.

This, although in appearance annihilated by the predominance of Christianity, not only maintained a considerable influence, but even found means, in a short time, to mould the whole Christian system to its own tenour and complexion. For many of the most eminent Fathers of the Church, having been educated in it,

it, adopted the Platonism it taught, as no unfit comment on the Christian faith. To the Alexandrian Platonism Aristotle's Philosophy afterwards succeeded; and, in the dress of the Schoolmen, acquired an undivided dominion during the whole interval from the destruction of the Roman empire to the revival of letters; maintained a manifest superiority long after its principles began to be questioned; and, at this day, when the Philosophy of the Schools is supposed to be generally exploded, holds no inconsiderable place on the benches of Metaphysics and Religion.

When,

When, in the sixteenth century, however, letters were revived, Philosophy, and every branch of human knowledge improved, and Religion was reformed. Among the many advantages which this happy revolution produced, some inconveniencies arose, as is always the case on every great and important event. Scepticism began to raise its head anew; and the same causes which had operated its production in ancient, also accomplished its resurrection in modern times.

For, the Scholastic Philosophy having proved one principal bulwark of the Church of Rome, those who wished well to Learning and to Religion,

gion, exerted themselves to accomplish its fall, and final expulsion. But, when their successful exertions had manifested its folly, and that of the religion founded upon it, many who had not learnt, and were incapable of striking out for themselves a better system, were left in obscurity and doubt. Even the remedy applied to this evil, rather augmented than diminished it. For, in order to substitute to the Scholastic, some other method of philosophizing, the Ancients were had recourse to, and their various sects, in some measure, revived. But, as the same discordance which was formerly observable among them, again struck each attentive and

and discerning eye, the same result ensued. The errors of every sect were acknowledged—the imbecillity of the human understanding deplored—the Middle Academy and Pyrrhonism seemed to revive.

Nor was argumentation only employed to expose the absurd dogmatism of Philosophers. Ridicule was likewise pointed with singular skill and success by many ingenious and satirical men, particularly by Erasmus in his *Praise of Folly*, and Cornelius Agrippa in his book on the *Vanity of Science*.

The intention of these learned men, who exposed the Scholastic Philosophy, and the religion built upon it,

it, was only to prepare the way for a more rational method of philosophizing, and for restoring the simplicity of the Gospel; and the happy reformation, in part, accomplished their wishes. But, as they had made it evident that, in order to arrive at their desirable end, implicit belief must be discarded, and free inquiry set on foot; so, others pursued these principles to a length which they little foresaw would, in after-times, be turned to such melancholy purposes, by the most extravagant Scepticism. In Metaphysics, and Natural Philosophy, Bacon, (to whom Philosophy owes so much in other respects) Des Cartes, and Malebranche strongly recommended

recommended the utility of Doubt before any one principle was admitted. Montaigne introduced the same opinion into Morals, and, in his *Essays*, often represented the foundation of moral obligation as uncertain and precarious. In this he has had a crowd of followers, as the writings of Hobbes, Mandeville, Bolingbroke, Hume and others, sufficiently evince. Lastly, Scepticism extended its ravages to the bulwarks of Religion herself, while it endeavoured not only to sap the foundations of Christianity, and to wrest from mankind the most glorious gift of Heaven, but even to deprive the world of its Father. Its insidious audacity can be unknown

known to no person who has any acquaintance with the writings of a Shaftesbury, a Toland, a Tindal, a Chubb, a Bolingbroke, a Hume, a Mettrie, a Gibbon, and all the numerous band of Sceptics which this and the last age have produced.

While Scepticism has thus been employed in attacking the foundations of Morality and Religion, it is somewhat remarkable, that it should also have been called in to defend them. Yet, in nothing more than this has the axiom of extremes been evinced. For, when the votaries of the Church of Rome plainly saw that it was impossible for them to hold their ground when assailed by the arms of just argument,

C

gument, they endeavoured to turn, against their enemies, their own battery. Accordingly, they, who had at first strenuously opposed the freedom of inquiry, endeavoured, at last, to push it to the utmost length. They set themselves to dispute every criterion of Truth, every foundation of Knowledge, every improvement of the Human Faculties. In this it was their design to evince the imbecillity of Human Reason, and its total incapacity to arrive at Truth; and, consequently, the necessity of acquiescing in some other guide; viz. implicit Faith in the Decrees of the Romish Church, however repugnant to the evidence of Sense and Reason, the

the futility of which Scepticism had thus established. Of this number *La Motte Vayer*, and the celebrated *Huet*, whose inconsistency, after having endeavoured in his *Demonstratio Evangelica* to establish the divine origin of Christianity on the most solid principles of Reason, was exceedingly glaring. Others of the Romish Communion aimed at overturning the authority of Reason, in order to substitute in its place certain mystical feelings, impressed, as they pretended, by Divine Inspiration, and which were the only infallible criteria of right and wrong, of truth and error. Of this class was the famous *Jerom Hyrnhaym*, who carried his sceptical

extravagance so far, as to assert, that he could not be positive that *four did not make six, and six four*; that *a whole was equal to its parts*; or, that *a thing could not both be, and not be, at one and the same time*. He also rejected every information of Sense; and maintained, that the Apostles who saw, conversed, and ate with our Saviour, acquired the certainty of all this, not so much by their Senses, which might deceive them, as by mere Faith.

These tenets have not been confined to the Roman Catholic Church, but have been also adopted by many fanatical or bigotted Protestants. Among some of them, the imbecillity
of

of Human Reason to lead to the discovery of Truth and of our Duty, is a favourite tenet. Among others, Religion is entirely placed in certain internal motions and feelings, of which they can give no other account, but that they possess them, and are actuated by their divine ardour, in the same manner as the Heathen Priests pretended to be inspired, and exclaimed,

Est Deus in nobis, agitante calescimus illo.

Thus Scepticism, which originally seemed to fly, with peculiar aversion, the Dogmatical Spirit, has, not unfrequently, like a person wandering about in a labyrinth, returned to the

place from which it set out, and reposed in the arms of blind, ignorant, and implicit Faith.

From this account it appears, that Scepticism is no more uniform and consistent, than that Dogmatism it pretends to attack and expose; but is, on the contrary, a fickle, unsettled, and motley thing, varying according to the different views and complexions of its professors. Its different kinds we shall endeavour to state more particularly in the next Section.

SECTION

SECTION II.

Of the different Kinds of Scepticism.

EVERY species of Scepticism seems reducible to the following classes :

I. The first we shall mention is composed of those who, convinced by their own experience, and by the history of all ages, that mankind are extremely apt to take up opinions without inquiry or proof, and to imbibe prejudices before they can understand truths ; that, moreover, there are many things which exceed the limits of the human capacity ;

and that those things which are least understood, are commonly most tenaciously maintained——many, I say, convinced of all this, inculcate the necessity of suspending assent till evidence is procured, of making inquiry in order to procure evidence, and of preserving an unbiassed mind in order to inquire with success. Such persons discard not first principles and primary truths, nor strike at the foundations of Religion and Virtue. On the contrary, they fully admit them, and wish only to build on their immoveable basis. Their grand aim is, to guard against Error and Prejudice, and to induce men to consider whose *image and superscription it bears,*

bears, before they receive the coin. This was the Scepticism of Socrates; this is conformable to the name of *Contemplation* which it assumes. Such may be called rational Sceptics; and, had no other prevailed in the world, human happiness would have been greatly promoted, and much trouble and misery saved. But, as this has prevailed least of all, and seen its place assumed by other bastard, pernicious, and ridiculous kinds, it has, of consequence, lost the name, and must not be referred to any of the classes to be exposed in this Discourse.

II. Of

II. Of these, one of the most astonishing is that we have mentioned in the conclusion of the last Section, which had in view to produce an implicit acquiescence in the decrees of the Romish Church. This class of Sceptics imagined that, by establishing the total incapacity of Human Reason, suggesting endless causes of doubt and uncertainty, and exaggerating them to the utmost, they would deprive their antagonists of their principal arms, and reduce them to silence. Implicit faith in Revelation was the only resource now left; and, as the sense of Revelation could not be apprehended by
any

any Human faculty, it became necessary to receive it from the voice of the Church, which had acquired the prescriptive right of determining religious affairs, and to obey it implicitly, and without inquiry. This plan was particularly observed in latter times, especially when it was intended to call back Protestants to the bosom of the Romish Church,

III. The arguments which these suggested, are readily admitted, and still more strongly urged, by another species of Sceptics; who, though they agree with the former in their principles, differ widely in the application of them. Their intention is,

is, to make an indirect attack upon Religion. With this view, they assume a sanctified look, and pretend a great zeal for Piety ; at least, that they are far from being enemies to it. They insist upon the necessity of entirely discarding Reason from Religion. Coinciding, thus, with many of its weak but zealous partizans, they have an easy subterfuge, in case their Infidelity should expose them to danger ; and they promote their designs still more effectually than if they candidly avowed them. For, by exhibiting Christianity as irrational, they hold it up to the intelligent part of mankind as unworthy of God, and pernicious to men :

men: by removing every standard of Truth, they destroy the means of establishing its divine authority, and they put it upon a level with every Superstition which has disgraced and perverted the human race. This has been the case of most of the French Philosophers falsely so called, and of all those Sceptics who, living in those countries where the secular arm is ready to support the decrees of the Church, are apprehensive of feeling its vengeance.

IV. Where these apprehensions are less grounded, men of this Sect have given free scope to their genius and inclination. They step
boldly

boldly forth, and aim direct blows at Morality and Religion. Endowed with shining talents, they burn with the desire of displaying them; which they think they can do no way so effectually, as by questioning, under the notion of popular prejudices, truths the most firmly established, and the most universally believed, and exposing in ridiculous lights whatever is most venerable and sacred. In this manner they rise to celebrity, fix the admiration of the ignorant and profligate, and form a party as devoted to them, as ever any religious sect was to its Founder; who swallow their paradoxes with implicit faith, and load with reproach,

or

or ridicule, all who presume to oppose, or even to differ from them.

Of this sort there are two subdivisions : First, Those who confine themselves to the rejecting of the Christian Faith, and to the weakening and obstructing of the belief of it in the world ; but, yet, pretend a sacred regard for Natural Religion. Secondly, Such as reject both Religions equally, strike at the roots of all Morality, and inculcate downright Atheism. The one, indeed, often leads to the other ; and experience has shewn, that many who began with Deism, made Atheism their termination.

V. Other

V. Other Sceptics there are, whose hearts are better than their understandings. Puzzled with difficulties they cannot solve for want either of abilities or of instruction, and unable to distinguish certainty from probability, or the different degrees of this last, and, thus, incapable of stating the boundaries of the Human Intellect, they wander in continual doubt, are the more entangled the more they endeavour to extricate themselves—and, at last, sink down in complete and desperate Scepticism. Of this, many instances might be adduced.

VI. The

VI. The last species of Scepticism we shall mention, is that which may be called Scepticism upon Trust; because this kind of Sceptic relies more on the speculations of others, than his own. Many, when they hear that Philosophers, both ancient and modern, have strongly recommended the withholding of assent from any System of Doctrines; when they perceive, moreover, that there is hardly any one point on which the ingenious and learned are perfectly agreed; that men of the greatest genius, and of the deepest erudition, have at times fallen into the grossest errors; and that they themselves are embarrassed and confounded, on every small exertion of

D

judgment

judgment they make ; recline on the couch of Scepticism and Indifference, as the only place of rest for their weak and uninquisitive heads.

These appear to us, at least the principal classes to which Sceptics may be reduced. It was necessary to state them, in order to have a clearer idea of the subject we are now treating. We proceed to make some general observations on the nature and genius of Scepticism, which may be applicable to them all.

SECTION

SECTION III.

*General Observations on the Nature
and Genius of Scepticism.*

FROM what has been advanced in the foregoing Sections it is evident, that Scepticism has been introduced in the same manner with most other corruptions which have prevailed in the world. It has sprung from a wise and salutary principle, pushed to an extravagant and pernicious length. For, any person who, unacquainted with its progress, should only attend to the original signification of the name, and to the objects

Scepticism pretends to have in view, could hardly fail to approve and commend it. The Sceptic tells you, he only seeks to *contemplate* and *inquire*, and to guard himself, and others, from those errors and prejudices which the neglected exercise of our rational faculties has engendered. Fair and smiling in appearance, he easily captivates the unwary observer, and, in fact, imposes upon him by *names and sophistical cavils*, as much as the most positive Dogmatist can do. But, the same inquiry and caution he inculcates with respect to every human opinion, must be used with regard to himself, in order to prevent that imposition which his sophistry would

would effect, and to discover the futility of his pretensions.

It is, then, the general principle of Scepticism (to whatever class it belongs), to reject every species of evidence, in as far as it demands the complete assent of the understanding, and to inculcate suspense and uncertainty. What chiefly distinguishes that species of Scepticism which is absurd and culpable, from that which is rational and praise-worthy, is, that while the latter withholds assent only from those opinions which are not supported by sufficient evidence—an evidence equal to the nature of the case, or to the demands of any rational mind—but refuses not to embrace such as

rest on good foundations; the former rejects both equally, requiring absolute demonstration in every case, whether the case admits of it or not; and, even in such cases as are susceptible of it, denying, or disputing, those first principles on which it must be founded.

That there are numberless truths, besides those which are strictly demonstrable, supported by evidence satisfactory to every rational mind, both the universal experience of mankind will confess, and the attributes of the Divine Nature completely declare. For, does it not throw a heavy imputation on the Deity, to suppose him to have bestowed upon us faculties which could be of no service to us,
or

or to exact from us duties, the true nature of which we are unable to discover?

External Sense, Experience, and Testimony, though none of them afford mathematical demonstration, furnish us, in numberless cases, with satisfactory evidence; and the conduct of life proceeds upon them, with perfect security, every day. Did we only rely upon their information, we should never err, but always walk upon a sure bottom. The grand cause of mistake, and of all its dismal consequences, is, that, in place of their Informations, men substitute the suggestions of Fancy and inveterate Prejudice: and the only mean of cor-

D 4
recting

recting this folly is, to recur to the original principles of our constitution, to try by this standard Prejudice and Imagination, and to reject them when found repugnant to it. But this the Sceptic entirely prevents, by asserting it is impossible to know what is the Nature of Things, what the Human Constitution: by discarding First Principles; denying every standard of Truth; and, thus, placing Folly and Wisdom, Right and Wrong, Religion and Superstition, on the same footing.

Moreover, it is incontrovertible, that the end of Speculation should be the discovery of Truth. But Truth can only be discovered by Evidence ;
and

and Evidence supposes some fixed and immoveable grounds on which it can be built, some principles which are universally acknowledged, and ultimately rest in the Human Frame. Without such axioms there can be no reasoning, no investigation of the more remote relations of things, which constitutes Proof, whether demonstrative or probable.

He, therefore, who inculcates eternal Speculation, and Suspension of Judgment, precludes the possibility of arriving at Truth, destroys all evidence, and takes the means for the end. He is like those persons who, after having employed much time and labour in learning a language, never think

think of profiting by the knowledge contained in the books that have been written in it; but content themselves with knowing a few significative sounds, without attending to the ideas they have been employed to signify.

Thus, the Sceptic not only misunderstands the end of *Scepticism*, or *Speculation*, but also destroys the very possibility of his own favourite system of *speculating*. For, without axioms, without primary truths, what speculation can be carried on? Sensation, Reflection, Reason, are useless * fa-

* Necessè est esse aliquid in causa quod probatione non egeat. QUINT. L. v. c. 10. non longe ab initio. See the whole passage: it is curious.

culties. Action, which, in Man, is the result of them, must be suspended—and our species reduced to a state worse than that of the Brutes, which have, at least, firm and unvarying instincts to direct them.

Hence, however philosophical in appearance, nothing can be less so in reality, than Des Cartes' grand maxim, which is the foundation-stone of Scepticism—That we must begin with doubting of every thing, in order to arrive at solid Knowledge: For, if we take nothing for granted, we cannot proceed one single step, but must remain in perpetual darkness. If, on the contrary, we have once settled original principles, and
carefully

carefully follow their direction, neither stretching them farther than they will go, nor pressing them with more than they will bear—we have got possession of a clue which will lead us through the labyrinth of Uncertainty, and bring us into the open and fertile fields of Truth, Certainty, and Happiness. Without this clue, we must wander hopeless of an exit; and, overpowered with disappointment and fatigue, sink down victims of the monster Despair.

To Scepticism, thus considered, (and this general character belongs to every species of Scepticism, excepting the first enumerated in the preceding Section) the most absurd
Dogmatism

Dogmatism is, in some respects, preferable ; in as much as it is better to be in possession of some portion of Truth, than never to possess any at all.

Upon the whole, it is evident that, however much the Sceptic may pretend to be an enemy to Prejudice and Error, he is, in reality, their greatest friend, seeing he removes every arm by which they may be attacked and confuted. To him, the best attested truths are on the same footing with the most palpable falsehoods—the clearest demonstrations with the most arbitrary hypotheses. Affecting the highest respect for Knowledge, and
Science,

Science, and Truth, he offers them the most outrageous injury. Professing the most perfect liberality of sentiment, he is actuated by the narrowest principles. Principles, do I say? His principle is, to have no principle; his creed, to have no creed; his science, the most profound ignorance. Accordingly, we have already seen, that Scepticism and the most consummate Bigotry have, more than once, joined hands, and maintained the same cause. Of this, more hereafter.

Absurdity and Folly thus accompany every step of Scepticism. But, in order to illustrate this more particularly,

ticularly, we shall consider its absurdity in its causes, in its objects, and its effects on the minds of its professors.

SECTION IV.

Of the Folly of Scepticism, considered with Regard to its Causes.

TO one or other of the following causes all Scepticism may be referred : A weak judgment, excessive love of distinction, a corrupted heart, or indolence.

As to the first : We have already seen, that many have been led to profess universal Indifference, because
they

they had not penetration, or industry, sufficient to consider and weigh the different opinions which have been broached in the world, with respect to Philosophy and Religion; to discern where they coincided, and where they clashed, and to try them all by a just standard of Truth. Bewildered amidst their variety, they can make no choice, and pronounce all equally unsatisfactory.

But, can any thing be more absurd? To what does it amount, but to this—That because men often see the same thing in different lights, there is no such thing as Sight? or, because things are magnified or diminished according to the medium through

through which they are seen, there is no real Object of Vision? This is to refer Truth and Falsehood, Right and Wrong, entirely to the Human Genius, and not to the Nature of Things. It is to cast an injurious reflection upon the Author of Nature, as if he had given us faculties only to hurt and perplex us. It is to annihilate the constitution of things, because men do not fully understand it.

While, in some, Scepticism originates in a weak judgment, in others, it proceeds from an intemperate love of fame and distinction. Imagining themselves possessed of more genius and penetration than all those who have gone before them, they affect to treat

E

their

their opinions with contempt, and their pretensions with ridicule. Hence, they fell all systems with the same levelling stroke. They take a peculiar pleasure in perplexing and embarrassing the pride of Dogmatism by subtle and sophistical objections, and in, thus, displaying their own ingenuity. Now, the greater the paradox they maintain; the more firm and solid the truths they attack; the more they strike out of the common path, and dissent from popular opinion; the more this vanity is gratified. Their abilities are, therefore, chiefly employed against Morality and Religion, which both rest on such firm foundations, and are held in veneration

tion by the generality of mankind. They, thus, attract the favourable regards of the profligate and fashionable, the gaze of the public, and the opposition of men of probity and talents. From all these circumstances a rich harvest of fame, the darling object of their wishes, is produced.

If Christianity, instead of being an established religion, had been little known, or despised, they would have stretched out to it a helping hand, and cried it up to the clouds—for the same reason that a Lawyer often undertakes a cause almost desperate, purely to acquire a character for eloquence and juridical ability. To the same cause is owing the singular

fondness many of this class of men have for the Religion and Laws of the Chinese*; which, while they take every opportunity of vilifying and degrading Christianity, they heap with the most indiscriminate eulogy. For, these first being little known and understood, and held up to the admiration of the world invested with the gaudy colouring of their eloquent pens, procure, for their temples, a resplendent wreath of glory. In Protestant countries, it is not uncommon for Sceptics to speak favourably of Popery itself†; and indeed, to them, Popery is infinitely more pleasing

* Raynal, Hist. Phil. et Pol. Vol. I.

† Hume's History of England, passim.

than

than Protestantism. For, wherever abuses and corruptions abound, their powers of ridicule and satire have a fairer field, and a greater appearance of truth is given to their objections against Religion.

But, let me ask, Can any thing be more contemptible and ridiculous than such a vanity—which aims at distinction merely for distinction's sake, without any regard to the foundation of it—which is the true copy of the fool mentioned by Solomon, who scatters *arrows and death, and saith, Am I not in sport**?—which considers not that fame, if not raised

* Prov. xxvi. 18.

on something beneficial and honourable, is but the fame of the thief or the robber, whose names are spread abroad in the voice of Desolation and Terror, and whose memories are preserved in the annals of Execution? Is not he, who set fire to the Temple at Ephesus, infamous to all generations? And in what, O thou vain Votary of applause! does thy fame differ from his, but in this, that he destroyed a glorious monument of arts, and snatched from his fellow-citizens the pleasure of admiring, and seeing others admire it; but thou wishest to destroy the most glorious monuments of the Divine benignity, and to deprive the whole human race of their sweetest comforts,

comforts, and most solid satisfactions ?

† In many, Scepticism can be imputed to no other cause, but to corruption of heart. Nothing so apt to blind the understanding, and to make men wish to confound every distinction of right and wrong, as vicious propensities, confusion of conscience, and deep-rooted prejudice. He who is convinced that, if Virtue and Vice are properly classed, the most honourable class will not be assigned to him, naturally wishes to take away the distinction ; and he who knows that the standard of Truth will necessarily expose the futility of his prejudices, will be fain to persuade the world that

there is not, and never has been, any such standard. Hence, a hundred sophistical arguments start up, like flies corrupting the honey, to confute the clearest dictates of Reason, and the strongest suggestions of Conscience.

In nothing has this been so evident, as in the attacks of Sceptics upon Christianity. As often as I consider the blaze of evidence with which that religion is surrounded, as well as its admirable tendency to promote the happiness of mankind, I have found it utterly impossible to reconcile, with any principles of probity, the eager zeal of many Sceptics to undermine and overturn it. Were it less friendly than it is, even to the temporal interests

terests of men ; had it a smaller tendency to promote peace and harmony in the world ; were its enemies less eager to destroy its doctrines, and to propagate their own ; did they rest satisfied with simple Infidelity, without straining every nerve to draw over others to their sentiments ; their conduct might rather be pitied as an error, than stigmatized as a crime : at least, the utmost of their blame might lie in neglecting to examine, or in a misapprehension of some of its doctrines. But, when we behold them exerting a degree of zeal which the greatest Enthusiast cannot exceed, in order to subvert a religion whose moral and benevolent nature they themselves

selves have often confessed, cannot but admire, and can substitute nothing that can equal, shall we not be warranted in calling their Scepticism, in the language of the Sacred Scriptures, *an evil heart of unbelief*? On what can it, in this case, be founded, but on a vicious temper, which prompts to aim at overturning what they have unhappily made it their interest should be false, and which has shaken off all regard for the highest interests of mankind?

But, of all causes of Scepticism, this is certainly the weakest, as well as the most odious. For, will the cavils and sophistry of men alter the nature of things, or confound what
are

are eternally different? Will their asserting there is no standard of Truth, no rule of Duty, exempt them from the punishment of having wilfully violated the one, and rejected the other? As well might one suppose that, by shutting his eyes, or walking into a dungeon, he annihilated light. Would it not be a much more rational scheme to employ their faculties in the discovery and study of Truth, and in the reformation of their lives according to its precepts? In this manner, they would render it no longer their interest that there should be no moral obligation, nor rule to determine the violation

violation of it ; but, the scales having fallen from their eyes, they would acknowledge its solidity, and exult in the prospect of the happiness which is raised upon it.

Lastly, The source of Scepticism with many is indolence. Although they have the faculties necessary for discovering Truth, they cannot give themselves the trouble. They are told that Philosophers and Divines differ upon almost every article. They are too lazy to attend to their opinions, and to the arguments which support them, to decide between them, and to chuse. No ; this would disturb their Epicurean repose. They, therefore,

fore, *sleep on and take their rest*, still pretending to suspend their assent till complete evidence is procured, and, yet, excluding it for ever by their indolence.

† But, how absurd such a conduct ! For, is it not ridiculous, and unbecoming a reasonable and active being, to bury, in the grave of Sloth, the noblest faculties of Nature ; to renounce those prerogatives of Reason and Liberty which alone raise him above the Brutes ; nay, to reduce himself to the state of a Vegetable ? By this indolent Scepticism the very instincts, desires, and propensities of Nature are fixed in eternal chains, by
excluding

excluding every criterion by which their proper objects and bounds can be ascertained.

SECTION V.

Of Scepticism, considered in Relation to its Objects.

WHAT, then, are the objects of Scepticism? Why, to establish Universal Doubt and Indifference, to induce men to entertain no opinion with respect to any subject, and to remain in perpetual Suspense. And what can be more absurd than the very proposal of such an object?

It

It is, or ought to be, the end of all Philosophy to lead to knowledge, wisdom, and happiness, in the conduct of life, to establish general truths from particular observations, and, from confusion and perplexity, to educe order and certitude.—If this is not the result, Philosophy and Learning are but empty names, and the most profound Ignorance is equally valuable with the most enlarged Science. What do we call the improvement of Knowledge, and the refinement of Art, but the discovery of facts, relations and circumstances which were before unknown; the developement of certain qualities which had, hitherto, escaped attention;

tion ; and the apprehension of certain minute, though immutable, proportions and connexions of things, which either did not strike or did not affect us ? But, do not all these imply both original principles to direct us in our inquiries, and fixed and determinate results of them ? If there is no Certainty, there can be no such thing as Taste, as Science, as Duty. All these necessarily suppose some ultimate principles to which they are referable, and are destroyed by Scepticism, which destroys these principles, and every mean and instrument of Knowledge——A Philosophy this, the most absurd and ridiculous imaginable ! Pretending to improve Knowledge,
it

it establishes universal ignorance ; it spreads darkness, while it promises light ; and involves in confusion, while it offers composure and ease.

For, supposing it universally adopted, to what a state must the Human Mind be reduced ! Plainly, to that which mankind have agreed to be the most dismal and unhappy of any—I mean, a state of Suspense. The Human Mind naturally desires some settled foundation on which it may repose ; inasmuch that, if it has no solid, it will content itself with an imaginary one. Whether it investigate truth, or pursue pleasure ; whether it exercise its intellect, or its will ; in both cases, Uncertainty is, of all states, the most
F unpleasant.

tion ; and the apprehension of certain minute, though immutable, proportions and connexions of things, which either did not strike or did not affect us ? But, do not all these imply both original principles to direct us in our inquiries, and fixed and determinate results of them ? If there is no Certainty, there can be no such thing as Taste, as Science, as Duty. All these necessarily suppose some ultimate principles to which they are referable, and are destroyed by Scepticism, which destroys these principles, and every mean and instrument of Knowledge——A Philosophy this, the most absurd and ridiculous imaginable ! Pretending to improve Knowledge,
it

it establishes universal ignorance ; it spreads darkness, while it promises light ; and involves in confusion, while it offers composure and ease.

For, supposing it universally adopted, to what a state must the Human Mind be reduced ! Plainly, to that which mankind have agreed to be the most dismal and unhappy of any—I mean, a state of Suspense. The Human Mind naturally desires some settled foundation on which it may repose ; inasmuch that, if it has no solid, it will content itself with an imaginary one. Whether it investigate truth, or pursue pleasure ; whether it exercise its intellect, or its will ; in both cases, Uncertainty is, of all states, the most
F unpleasant.

unpleasant. It rushes forward to the desired object, and, flying over the glimmering space of *middle terms*, pants for the clear and certain light of a *conclusion*.

Now, to this dismal state it is the profest design of the Sceptic to reduce it. It is his boasted aim to fetter the human faculties, and consign them to a dungeon of darkness; in which, from the Mind's insatiable desire of light, there must necessarily be *weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth*. It is his exalted boast to crush the keen impulse of Curiosity, which charges through so many difficulties; which bears the burning heats of the Torrid, and the petrifying colds of the

the

the Frigid Zone; which wears with patience the solitary hour, and wastes the midnight lamp, in quest of a new or a clearer idea, and of more enlarged information. He wishes to extinguish that noble ardour which inflames the virtuous soul in prosecution of some great and generous enterprize, or of its own improvement and exaltation, in approaching nearer and nearer to its chief and eternal good. For, if no certainty can be obtained, why be curious, and diligent to acquire it? If no immutable difference between good and evil exists, why be ardent to exhibit the one, and cautious to avoid the other? If there is no Virtue, no Vice; why relinquish so

many advantages, and undergo so many miseries, for the sake of this fanciful distinction; for the sake of that Conscience which is but an illusion; that esteem of the good and wise which rests upon no solid basis; that favour of God for the securing of which no rule can be delivered?

It is, in fine, the boast of the Sceptic to undermine, by destroying Religion, Man's most solid support under the various pressures of this transitory and checquered scene; to snatch from him the only true cordial he possesses when groaning under the strokes of Adversity and Affliction; to snatch from him the chief sweetener of all his joys, when, brightened by the sunshine

shine of Prosperity, the prospect smiles around him, and he blesses his lot and the Author of it; and to consign him, destitute and trembling, to the horrors of Despair. Can a Philosophy which professes such purposes recommend itself a single moment to any feeling or rational mind? and must not Folly, as well as Insensibility, be its constant companions?

Let us suppose it universally prevalent, would human society be better regulated, or human happiness be better promoted by it? Were people generally convinced, that there are no sure principles, no foundation of Moral Obligation, or of Religion and Piety, or of the Christian Faith, would

they become better friends, better fathers, better husbands, wives, brothers, subjects, magistrates, neighbours—in a word, better men? If the answer must be in the negative, then it must be granted that, of all absurdities, that is the most absurd, which, under the sage appearance of Wisdom, tends to render men more ignorant, and less virtuous, than they were before.

Indeed, this scheme is so repugnant to the natural feelings of mankind (and this crowns its absurdity), that it can hardly ever become universally prevalent. The truth is, strict Scepticism is impossible, even to the Sceptic himself. It may go as far as to eradicate, from the minds of many, a
sense

sense of the duties of Natural and Revealed Religion; it may confirm tyrants and profligates in their oppression and licentiousness: but it will never extirpate all sense of Right and Wrong, never completely silence the reproaches of Conscience. These Sceptics will feel, and *believe* in spite of themselves; and a still voice within them will continually whisper, that their system is Folly, their assertions Falsehood, and their object Destruction; while, with respect to mankind in general, their common sense, their necessities, their propensity to association, their conscience, their feeling of a Divine government, will ever prevent them from adopting the Sceptic's

tenets, however fashionable they may be at a particular season. Fogs and clouds may obscure the sky for a few days; but the resplendent luminary will at last pierce his way, and scatter the darkness before his rays. So, the clouds of Scepticism may prevail for a while; but their prevalence can never be lasting and general—but must soon be dispelled by the steady and glorious lights of Nature and Revelation.

SECTION

SECTION VI.

*Of Scepticism, considered in its Effects
on the Minds of its Professors.*

WE have already seen, in a former Section, that Scepticism is commonly founded in prejudice, or vicious passion. And what effects must such causes produce? What have they actually produced on the conduct of those whose breasts they influence?

In the first place, as resulting from prejudice, the effect is the same as in the case of the most complete Dogmatism. The views of the Mind are for
ever

ever fixed, and its compass limited. As they open, or shut, at pleasure, the inlets of the Understanding, they never fail to exclude whatever has the most distant tendency to expose, or rectify them. Every object is viewed only through the medium the Mind has coloured for itself, is painted, like the windows of some Gothic church, with imaginary figures, and nothing received that is not stamped with its own mark.

* Besides, this attachment to prejudiced views of things teaches a wretched and pernicious Sophistry; which tortures, into an unnatural conformity, the most contradictory cases;

cases; produces a no less unnatural disagreement between others perfectly similar; and, while it rejects the plainest, best-established truths, sets up the most ridiculous paradoxes. It can transform Right into Wrong, and Wrong into Right; Virtue into Vice, and Vice into Virtue; or rather, reduce both to a non-entity. In short, it can alter the nature of things, and make the whole universe turn upside down at its pleasure; searching out and grasping at every thing, however improbable, that has any tendency to support its hypotheses.

Another effect of Scepticism is, that it renders men very troublesome, if not very dangerous, members of Society.

ciety. It is peculiarly unhappy, that, like every other party-spirit (for a party-spirit it undoubtedly is), it not only enslaves the mind in which it prevails, but also seeks to deprive others of their mental freedom, by drawing them over to its sentiments, and, thus, enlarging the pale of the Sceptic's spiritual dominion. For there is not a more proselytizing Sect than his in the world. On this account, if any prospect is offered of propagating its tenets, there is nothing it scruples to put in practice. In its eyes, the loosening of the bands of Society, and striking at the pillars of Human Happiness, are matters of small moment.

We

We are much mistaken, if we think it is only for Religion men can be enthusiasts. They are also enthusiasts, and very violent ones too, against it. Was there ever a zeal more excessive, than that which Infidels have of late years discovered for the subversion of Christianity? Have we not seen them search with avidity every musty record, to draw forth some stale objection, which ages ago had been refuted*? Have we not seen them penetrate the inmost recesses of Nature, to discover what the general survey of her works cannot afford them, viz. the means of

* Gibbon.

overturning the only just account of her origin and government*? Have we not seen them employ every cavil which a captious sophistry could suggest, every art which a fertile imagination could invent, to disgrace and misrepresent the Truth, to load it with fictitious difficulties, and to exaggerate beyond measure the real? Have we not seen a late ingenious Author, whose talents have only been exceeded by his abuse of them, and his literary fame by his thirst to augment it, leave as his legacy to the world, an attempt to prove it fatherless; to throw dismal darkness over

* The Books of Moses.

those prospects which Religion had rendered clear and serene; and to reduce to a level with the Brutes those souls which soar to the rank of Angels*?

Such are the sad effects of religious Scepticism! and, although it may be alleged, that these effects consist merely in Speculation; yet, if the actions of men be at all governed by their principles, there is surely much danger of such Speculation's manifesting itself in practice. If it does not, it can only be, because such persons are inconsistent; which is urging a very poor plea for their Philoso-

* Hume's Dialogues on Natural Religion.

phy—seeing what excuses their conduct, condemns their principles, when it is alleged as their happiest circumstance, that they appear not in action.

Indeed, what confidence can be placed in such persons, or what security can Society have for their good behaviour? Plainly, none but this : that as men are often worse than they appear, so they are sometimes better ; which is rather a tottering ground to build upon. I will not maintain, that all Infidels are dishonest men. Experience has shewn the contrary in common life. But this I will maintain, that, seeing one ruling passion, whatever it be, can
carry

carry men such fatal lengths, whenever their neighbour's property, bed, or reputation shall become the object of another ruling passion, I can see no great bar to their indulging it.

Further, as this temper is extremely pernicious in its influence, so it is extremely difficult to be corrected. In other vicious habits, where the cause of the evil lies in the excessive strength of some particular passion hurrying the Soul away, as with a whirlwind, and, for the time, chaining down disapproving Reason, the Understanding, after the tumult has subsided, is left in possession of its own natural views of things, and, of consequence, in a condition to rectify

tify the unlawful propensity by which it had been for a space overpowered : and to this it is prompted by that remorse which succeeds every vicious indulgence resulting from passion, and not from prejudice.

But, in the case now before us, the Understanding itself is corrupted; and, consequently, all means of reformation are cut off, as long as this corruption continues. Erroneous views are adopted as well-grounded speculations, prejudices as principles, absurdities as maxims. The whole order of the Intellect is changed; and, from a habit of cavilling, giving at last full credit to his own reveries, the person acts and reasons wrong—
not

not from the fumes of appetite or passion, but from the coolness and composure of system.

Hence, refer him for conviction to principles universally admitted, he rejects them without scruple: repeat to him the general voice of mankind, he treats it as a vulgar prejudice: adduce to him the strongest testimony, he regards it as a partial and unfair account: ply him with all the force of argument, his sophistry supplies him with evasions to every thing you can urge: admit his own ground for a moment, he immediately shifts it; and, to shun your pursuit, runs through the endless mazes of cavil and chicane. When almost come

up with, and ready to be caught, if possessed of any talent for ridicule, he employs it to ward off the deadly blows of serious argument. If even this, by being turned against himself, succeeds ill, his last resource is to grow angry, and to call you bigot and enthusiast. In short, recourse will be had to any thing whatever, rather than yield to conviction, honestly confess an error, and diligently reform it. For, be its cause what it may, it is certain that men are much more averse to acknowledge an error than a fault, to be convicted of absurdity than of vice.

But, what renders Scepticism more incorrigible is, that this invincible obstinacy

obstinacy is wonderfully concealed from the person whom it characterises. He imagines that this defect can only be imputed to those who contradict him, and whom he denominates pedantic Dogmatists; while he himself is quite moderate and reasonable. His understanding, thus totally obscured, is busied, not to rescue him from error, but to confirm him in it; not to guide him to truth, but to exclude it from him for ever. Melancholy delusion! which flatters with light, when all is darkness; and cries *Peace! peace! when there is no peace.*

All this is particularly the case with religious Infidelity. Here, ma-

ny circumstances concur to rivet men in their prejudices, and even to preclude every moral probability of their removal. Before Infidelity can be contracted in a Christian country, a great deal must be got over. The force of education, the strength of the Christian evidences, the natural dictates of the heart itself—all these must be stifled, before an *evil heart of unbelief* can be superinduced; and, when it is superinduced, its former obstacles become its chief supports. For, as every step of a vicious progress adds boldness to the offender; so, the higher Scepticism rises, the firmer and more obdurate does it become. As in Religion, therefore,

therefore, both the importance of the object, and the validity of the evidence, are of all the greatest, there can hardly remain any means of conviction, if these are undervalued and rejected. For, then, the very danger of being in the wrong, which should contribute to produce conversion, often becomes a powerful mean of strengthening the delusion: as if the way to avoid a precipice were to blind the eyes, and walk resolutely towards it.

Pride, likewise, and the shame of acknowledging so egregious an error, and of retracting all the unfair representations, all the ridiculous pictures of Religion which Infidels commonly

delight to exhibit—steps the most mortifying to self-sufficiency—powerfully conspire to keep the eyes for ever shut, and to prolong the delusion, till Death involves them in a night on which no day shall ever rise. Hence, the sacred Scriptures very justly assert, that, if a man *believe not Moses, and the Prophets*, i. e. the evidences on which Religion is already founded, *neither will he believe though one should rise from the dead.*

From this deduction it is evident, that there are two striking inconsistencies into which Scepticism naturally falls :

I. Though obstinate to excess, and averse to conviction, it is, on occasions,

casions, of all tempers, the most credulous. Whatever seems to favour its own passion, or prejudice, however improbable, nay, self-contradictory, it admits without hesitation or scruple, treats with the profoundest respect, and cherishes with the most indulgent fondness. Having been all doubt and distrust in matters of a contrary complexion, it becomes, in this, all belief and certainty: having *strained at a gnat, it swallows a camel*; and, having rejected the plainest truths, and facts the best attested, admits the most glaring absurdities, and the most palpable falsehoods. Sceptics to excess, in one instance, persons of this character seem to endeavour

your

vour to compensate it by being child-
ishly credulous in another; and, hav-
ing once forsaken the middle point
of Truth, vibrate continually between
the two extremes of Error.

Thus, it is evident, that Bigotry
and Infidelity, apparently the most
inconsistent of all things, are, at
bottom, very closely allied. They
are both obstinate and narrow-
minded: they both conceive them-
selves alone possessed of wisdom
and probity, and stigmatize every
other opinion with the odious titles
of knavery or folly. They are ever
introducing their own favourite to-
pics, evincing the solidity of their
system, as if afraid it should not be
sufficiently

sufficiently acknowledged, and connecting it with every thing in which they are concerned. As Bigots have cant words and phrases which they continually introduce, so also have Infidels. Enthusiasm! Fanaticism! Priestcraft! are the constant subjects of their exclamations, and their never-varying themes.

The case is, that neither Bigotry nor Infidelity have any sincere regard for Truth; both are actuated purely by a spirit of Sect or Party; and, therefore, must necessarily be marked with all the extravagance which that spirit inspires.

II. The second inconsistency we hinted at, is the intemperate love
Sceptics

Sceptics manifest of paradox, their unabating ardour to establish and give vogue to hypotheses the most repugnant to the universal feelings of mankind, notwithstanding they profess to dismiss all hypothesis, and to bid adieu to opinion. What men so fond of establishing new opinions, of inventing new systems, as our modern Sceptics; and what men so lavish in their censures of system and dogmatizing? What greater inconsistency than to attempt to eradicate every sentiment, every principle congenial to the human breast, to recommend universal doubt and indifference, and to declare that Truth lies for ever hid from human eyes; yet,

yet, notwithstanding, to inculcate the greatest improbabilities, to endeavour to persuade men of what their feelings revolt at, and to deem their bare assertion sufficient to give all this a currency*?

In short, as we find the sentiments of many religious communities and sects in perpetual fluctuation, we may observe those of Sceptics subject to the same instability; insomuch that I have always thought, that their writings were generally the best refutations of themselves. A person, who will read them with attention and

* That the World is without an Author; that there is no difference between Vice and Virtue; and no rewards or punishments for them, &c. &c.

judgment,

judgment, will easily discover, in them, perpetual inconsistencies.

This must ever be the case with whatever is not strictly conformable to truth; which is itself nothing but a conformity to the nature of things. Now, in the nature of things, every part hangs together, and corresponds. Whatever is conformable to this will, therefore, be every where consistent. What is not must, on the same account, betray some incongruity, some striking discordance, in some part or other of the system.

From all that has been said upon Scepticism, it appears that, though
pretending

pretending to a more rational procedure than any other species of Philosophy, it is the most irrational of all ; that, though it assume the appearance of humility, it has more pride than Stoicism itself ; that, though it boasts of liberality, it fastens the mind in the fetters of Prejudice ; and that, though it inveighs against Dogmatism, it is frequently most dogmatical. For, we have seen that it has been often employed to inculcate implicit faith in the most absurd and pernicious doctrines ; and how obstinate, positive, and credulous Sceptics are with relation to their own systems. Nay, what is more, the most egregious Sceptics

Sceptics { have often, on the apparent approach of dissolution, when they saw Death and a future world before them in all their aggravated horrors, been impelled to embrace the most abject Superstition, in order, if possible, to appease an offended Deity^{*}: and how? By dishonouring him in another manner—by an

* As was the case with the celebrated Lord Rochester. The story of the Prince of French Sceptics, lately deceased, having made an ample confession of the Romish faith, when he supposed himself on his death-bed long before he died, is well known. See also a German work, intitled, "*Pontoppidani Kraft der Warheit, der Atheistische und Unglauben Zubefiegen in verscheydenen historischen Beyspiehlen solcher Religioni Shoffer rogestellt, welche sich entwedder bekehrt, oder auch ein Ende mit Schrecken denommen Rabbon.*"

(a) *Voltaire.*

homage

homage unworthy of his attributes, and pernicious to his creatures. Are not the fancies of children, or old women's tales, infinitely more rational, than a Philosophy productive of such effects?

*Denique, nil scire si quis putat, id quoque nescit;
An scire possit, qui se nil scire fatetur?
Nunc, igitur, contra, nullam contendere causam,
Qui capite ipse suo instituit vestigia retro.*

LUCRETIVS, lib. iv. l. 471.

E N D O F P A R T I.

H

A N

THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

LIBRARY

100 St. George Street

Toronto, Ontario

Canada

M5S 1A5

Telephone: (416) 978-2811

Telex: 380911

Fax: (416) 978-2811

Internet: <http://www.library.utoronto.ca>

E-mail: library@utoronto.ca

Open: 10:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.

Monday - Friday

Saturday 10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Sunday 12:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Public Access

Free of Charge

For more information

visit our website

at www.library.utoronto.ca

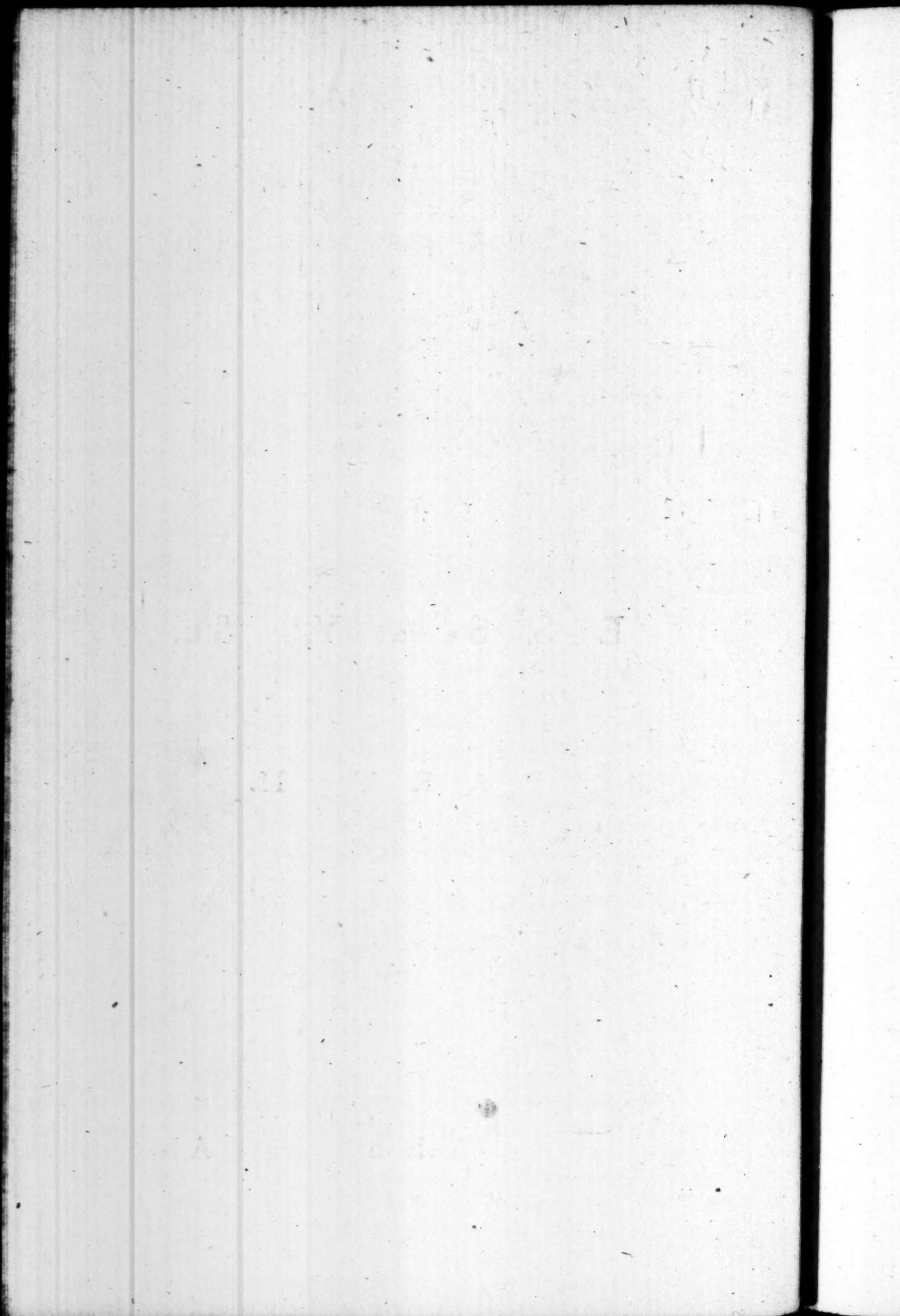
A N

E S S A Y, &c.

P A R T II.

H 2

A N



A N
E S S A Y, &c.

P A R T II.

*Of the Absurdity of Dogmatism on
religious Subjects.*

CICERO somewhere observes,
that, in order to discuss any
subject with propriety, it is first ne-
cessary to have clear notions of
the terms in which it is expressed.
Agreeably to this observation, we
shall, in order to shew the absur-
dity of dogmatizing on religious
subjects, 1st, Endeavour to state the

different significations of Dogmatism, and to define that which we ought to annex to it in this question. 2dly, Point out its origin in self-conceit, and its repugnance to the first principles of justice and equity. 3dly, We shall evince its absurdity, as it tends to obstruct religious improvement. Lastly, We shall shew that it has produced every corruption of the Christian faith.

SECTION

SECTION I.

Of the different Significations of Dogmatism.

TO Dogmatism is peculiarly applicable an observation already made, in the First Part, viz. That many things extremely good and beneficial in their primitive and unadulterated state, grow quite the reverse when pushed beyond it. If we consider the original signification of the word, by Dogmatism is only meant the holding some particular opinion, or system of opinions, in preference

to any other. Accordingly, in ancient times, every Sect of Philosophers, the Sceptics and those of the *Middle Academy* excepted, were called *Dogmatists*, because each of them embraced, defended, and taught a particular system of its own.

Now, it is evident, from what has been said in the First Part of this Discourse, that this, so far from implying any thing wrong and blame-worthy, is not only right, but even unavoidable. No man, who has the use of his reason, but must form some judgment of the persons and things around him; and, if the subject to which he directs his attention be complicated,
make

make some certain combinations of ideas, or adopt those which have been made, with regard to it, by others: that is, in other words, a *System*. To be able to form such digested schemes, is what chiefly distinguishes the Philosopher, and indeed the sensible man, from the ignorant and illiterate. The grand point is not, to relinquish *System* altogether (which would be to relinquish the exercise of Reason, and a plan of conduct)—but to compose our *System* upon just principles, allowing its parts neither too great nor too small a proportion, and directing them all to a just and rational result.

On

On this account, I have often been surpris'd at the little discernment of those, who with every notion of System discarded from Religion. They certainly push the matter too far, and aim at introducing into it, what exists in no other Science whatever. On every other subject, we find some regular series of opinions adopted and maintained, and Philosophers classed according to that which they favour. In Astronomy, the Ptolemean, the Copernican, the Cartesian, the Newtonian systems have successively prevailed. In Morals, *self-love, benevolence, reason, the will of God, the nature and fitness of things, a moral sense,*

sense, have all been laid down as the foundation of moral obligation, and characterised so many different Systems.

The case is the same in Religion; where, indeed, this propensity to *dogmatize* has been most miserably abused. But, because a thing has been abused, it is absurd to condemn the proper use of it—especially if that use (as we have seen in the present case) is unavoidable.

As the abuse, however, has been much more frequent in Religion than the use itself; and as those religious opinions, which have been the worst digested, and most hastily
taken

taken up, have been commonly the most tenaciously maintained, and diligently propagated; on this account, the term *Dogmatism* seems, at present, to have three principal senses:

1st, It signifies the adoption of opinions without any adequate evidence, or the maintaining them with such inflexible rigidity, as excludes further information and inquiry. Although a person may have certain grounds for embracing any sentiment, yet he may not have considered it in all its parts and connexions; and therefore, by further inquiry, may acquire new or more extensive ideas with regard to it, which may introduce some further modification of his belief.

2dly,

2dly, *Dogmatism* is made to denote that fond attachment to our own sentiments, which makes us consider them as the infallible standards of right and wrong, and reject those of others as criminal and abominable. On every other subject whatever, there is a strong propensity in mankind to set up their own notions as rules, and to deny others that liberty they take to themselves. But, in Religion, this is peculiarly remarkable. Because the object is, here, the most important, people are apt to think that their Dogmatism must be in proportion; and the very circumstance, which should render them most diffident

dent of themselves, and open to conviction, has principally made them self-conceited and obstinate.

3dly, *Dogmatism* is often used to signify that intolerant spirit, which wrests from others the rights of conscience, and imposes upon them our own sentiments in an arbitrary, and, as it is called, *dogmatical* manner. This is a necessary consequence of an overweening attachment to our own favourite notions. When men's affections are entirely pre-occupied by an object, they can scarcely remain in calm and retired speculation. They must communicate their tenets to others, and bespeak their concurrence,

concurrence. If they procure it not by fair, they are often tempted to seek it by iniquitous means—even by violence and cruelty—and to torture people's bodies, in order to gain their hearts.

In whichever of these three senses last-mentioned Dogmatism is considered, its absurdity will be manifest, from what we now proceed to observe.

SECTION

SECTION II.

*That Dogmatism is founded in Pre-
sumption, and leads to Injustice.*

ANY person, who is ingenuous,
and has the smallest reflection,
will confess that he has fallen into
numberless errors and mistakes; that
he is liable to be imposed upon by
appearances; and that, against this,
nothing but the greatest circumspec-
tion can furnish him with any tole-
rable defence. The result of this
conviction plainly is, that one should
be diffident of oneself, modest, ready

to

to receive instruction—in a word, that he should be no *Dogmatist*.

If the contrary of all this take place; if he rashly adopt opinions; if he obstinately maintain them; if he refuse to hear the other side of the question, or endeavour with obstinacy and violence to obtrude his tenets upon others; it is plain that man has no proper notion of himself, but is puffed up with the most unsufferable pride. Nothing less than the notion of his being free from all possibility of mistake, can induce him to arrogate to himself the sole right of deciding, and of fixing his opinions as standards for the world. What a veil of self-conceit, then, must be spread before that man's

I

eyes,

eyes, who has never felt himself in the wrong; who has never experienced his own weakness, never the deceitfulness of appearances, nor the folly of yielding to them with too precipitate eagerness! This experience, in any one instance, must break the spell of Dogmatism, and display its folly. For, if a person may mistake in one instance, he may in others, and may be falling when he thinks he stands very firm.

It is true (as we have already shewn), that no man can be without his opinions, and system of opinions too: yet, these opinions, this system may be professed with modesty, and maintained with candour. They should

should be held as the result of our best inquiries, not as the dictates of infallibility. They may be maintained, as recommended by their superior evidence : but others must be allowed the same liberty we take to ourselves, that of adopting what opinions we please. Nothing but infallibility can justify Dogmatism : and, as Dogmatism rests on self-conceit, whatever be the subject, this foundation of it is doubly conspicuous in Religion ; because the extent and sublimity of the object may the more easily expose us to mistake, at the same time that its importance renders it more incumbent upon us to guard against being deceived.

As Dogmatism, thus, finds its origin in presumption, it leads likewise to the most flagrant injustice. For, whatever title any person has to form religious tenets, or to interpret such as are already established, the same every other possesses for himself. Of all rights, those of Conscience are the most sacred and precious; as, in their enjoyment, the grand prerogative of Human Nature, by which Man is distinguished from the inferior animals, consists. And, how can this faculty be exercised, if unimpaired liberty is not granted to it? Take this away, and the Lord of the lower creation is reduced to their level, the property of a master.

What

What commiffion can any man fhew to prefcribe to another's confcience, or to prohibit the free expreffion of his speculative opinions, if they are not injurious to Society? None, furely, but power alone; which the courfe of human affairs may foon transfer from him to the object of his oppreffion.

It is fomething aftonifhing, that this unalienable right of private judgment fhould have been trodden under foot more in religious, than in any other matters whatever. For, furely, if, in matters of fmall moment, freedom of judgment and of fpeech be deemed fo valuable a poffeffion, how much more in thofe

which regard the most essential interests of Human Nature! This is a truth so evident, that the tyrannical practice of mankind can alone render any illustration of it necessary. To a person who should contemplate only the inherent rights of Humanity, nor consider the violations of them abounding in the world, it would appear utterly astonishing, that a grave and judicious historian should be considered as uttering a beautiful sentence, when he exclaims, *Rara temporum felicitas, ubi sentire quæ velis, & quæ sentias dicere licet**! What he sets down as the characteristic of

* Tacitus. Hist. Lib. i.

times uncommonly happy, should belong to every period, and to every society: yet, in how few do we find it!

To restore this religious liberty, which was long oppressed and buried under the weight of superstition and depravity, was one main end of the Christian Revelation. Hence, it is justly styled the *perfect law of liberty*, because it delivered mankind from the cruel bondage of rites and ceremonies, and human inventions, which kept the appearance of Religion, while the reality had utterly perished; and taught them in what true piety consisted, viz. the love of God, and the love of man. But, such is

the perversity of human nature, such its propensity to Dogmatism and spiritual tyranny, that the instrument of deliverance was again converted into an instrument of slavery; inso-much that spiritual usurpation, and the oppression of conscience, have been carried to greater lengths among Christians, than perhaps they ever were in the Heathen world.

SECTION

SECTION III.

That Dogmatism obstructs religious Improvement, nay, destroys the very Effence of Religion.

IT is the very effence of the human faculties to acquire enlargement and strength, by a gradual progression ; and, from seeds almost imperceptible, dropt by the Creator's hand, to rise, by culture, to the most astonishing magnitude. For this purpose, however, discipline, instruction, experience are indispensably necessary ; all which a *dogmatical* spirit renders

renders quite ineffectual. Its views are for ever fixed, and their compass determined. Whatever falls not within that compass it looks upon with indifference, contempt, or abhorrence. In vain, information is presented; in vain, new discoveries are brought before the mind which it governs: it is incapable of receiving, or examining them. Its adopted sentiments are the invariable standards. How shall they, then, be tried by any other rule? It is presumption and audacity to degrade them from their towering elevation.

Humanum est errare is frequently in the Dogmatist's mouth; but it is
only

only to prove, that he himself is an exception to the general rule. He allows more weakness and folly to the rest of mankind, that he may assume more ability and wisdom to himself. It never enters his imagination, that any one circumstance, any one relation of the subject in question, can have escaped his notice, any false appearance have imposed upon his sagacity, or any passion or prejudice warped his judgment. The plain consequence is, that he trudges on in the old beaten track, without striking into a new path, or conceiving there can be any region beyond that which his contracted eye can take in. To him,
every

every improvement is lost. Experiment, the grand source of human knowledge, is proscribed, because experiment supposes something yet unknown; which Dogmatism does by no means admit. The wings of Genius, ever spread to soar to some unexplored height, are clipt, or torn off. Science, ever expanding, and shooting out new branches, is cut off by the stump; or, like those trees which have their particular space in the espalier, or hot-house, is pruned whenever it rises above its prescribed height, or stretches beyond its stated boundary.

What else but Dogmatism consigned Science, for so many ages, to
chains

chains and darkness? Hypotheses were assumed without experiment or inquiry. Invention and sophistry were employed to support them. The whole course of nature was strained into a conformity with the favourite system. To reform it, was audacious; to question it, criminal; to reject it, profane. Fenced round with the ramparts of presumption and ignorance, it resisted every assault of rational inquiry; and errors and prejudices were handed down from age to age. Art was rudeness; Science, jargon; Philosophy, barbarous verbosity. In this situation matters continued, till the lights of antiquity were allowed to shine anew, and dispel the gloom; till more extensive experiment,

experiment, and further inquiry, gave them fresh lustre; till Dogmatism was dismissed, and True Philosophy, the daughter of Investigation, and the companion of Modesty, was substituted in its place.

If Dogmatism has a tendency to obstruct improvement in every branch of knowledge, it has, above all, this fatal tendency in Religion. For it has happened, by a strange fatality, that the subject which requires the greatest prudence, deliberation, and circumspection in forming our opinions with regard to it, has been handled with very little of any of them; nay, has been deemed to exclude Examination altogether, as the
child

child of Profanity and Wickedness. Hence, where religious Dogmatism prevails, the most pestilent doctrines, if they happen to be the favourite ones, are built upon a rock of adamant, which shall never be moved, however strong and powerful the engines of argument which are applied to them.

^xIt may, indeed, be urged, that Religion differs from every other science which is the result of human ingenuity alone, in this important respect, that, being the dictates of Divine Wisdom, it is already perfect, and admits of no improvement or melioration. The plea of human weakness cannot, in this case, therefore,

fore, be admitted as a ground of free inquiry and discussion; because the doctrines in question, flowing not from fallible Reason, but from Omniscience itself, can never be tainted with error, but must be eternal truths. Here, then, Dogmatism is Virtue; and Hesitation, or Inquiry, is Irreligion.

This is frequently urged by religious Dogmatists, and Bigots of all denominations. But, it loses its whole force, when it is considered, that the question is not about the genuine dictates of Divine Revelation, which all will allow to be perfect and uncontrovertible; but about what is to be held as such, and what
not;

not; and what is the just sense and meaning of such as are acknowledged. Pagans and Mahometans pretend to have divine revelations, as well as Christians. Now, these must be tried by some rules, in order to know which of all these pretensions is well founded. Christians, who acknowledge one common Revelation, vary, nevertheless, almost *ad infinitum*, concerning the true sense of it. These interpretations are subject to error, as well as every other exertion of the human mind; and must be received or rejected, rectified or confirmed, according as they shall be found to agree with, or contra-

K

dict,

dict, Reason and Divine Revelation. For this purpose, free inquiry and debate are necessary; and it must be admitted as a principle, that the decisions of no man, or set of men, are to be received merely on the footing of an *ipse dixit*. In a word, Dogmatism, which necessarily precludes all free inquiry on religious subjects, must be dismissed before any solid improvement of religious knowledge can be expected.

What I have said with regard to speculative, is no less true in relation to practical Dogmatism. The man who supposes himself unexceptionable

tionable in every part of his conduct, will never hearken to admonition or reproof; never reform any bad habits; never rise to any moral excellence; but will proceed, through the journey of life, with his satchel of vice and folly continually enlarging, till it bear him down at last with its weight.

Let the Dogmatist also reflect, that, by setting down his religious tenets as the eternal voice of Truth, and prohibiting the free investigation of them, he destroys the very nature of Religion. Religion excludes all constraint and violence. It implies the voluntary assent of

the understanding, and the consent of the heart. No sooner does a person prescribe to others any set of opinions, as alone to be adopted, but he confesses he is satisfied with the declaration of the lips, and with external demeanour, and is not at all solicitous about the heart and dispositions. For, these bid defiance to all spiritual usurpation. Conscience is ever free, with regard at least to mental freedom, however much she may be denied the rights of expression or action: and in the heart, and in the conscience, Religion resides. Hence, the Dogmatist, attempting to bind the conscience,

science appears in the most ridiculous light imaginable; because he attempts what is impracticable, and destroys the essence of Religion, by making it consist in some set form of words, in external rites and ceremonies, which have nothing religious in their own nature, and only become so by being associated with Religion, or made expressive of it.

Accordingly, because Dogmatism has had but too great a prevalence in the world, nothing is so dependent upon external circumstances, as the religious sentiments of most people; sentiments, which

should be entirely exempt from the influence of every thing external. In fact, they are, commonly, just as accidental as extraction, and native country, which depend in no respect upon ourselves. In whatever church we have been born, or educated, to that it is expected we must belong: So that a man's religion is, for the most part, determined before he is born, and is much less his own choice than his business or profession.

SECTION

SECTION. IV.

That Dogmatism has produced all the Corruptions which have disgraced Christianity.

NOTHING could be more
 simple, plain, and unaffected,
 whether with respect to doctrine,
 discipline, or worship, than primitive Christianity. How few, and
 perspicuous, the articles of faith
 prescribed by our Saviour and his
 Apostles! The belief of one God,
 and of the divine mission of his
 Son Jesus Christ, comprehended the

whole of the primitive Christian's creed. Level to every capacity, and evinced to every impartial understanding, the celestial doctrine was not obscured and perplexed with subtle questions from the School of Plato or Aristotle, nor with over-curious investigations of the Divine decrees, or discussions of subjects exceeding the human capacity. Provided the fundamental points were maintained, difference of opinion produced no schisms, no anathemas, but was accompanied with mutual charity and forbearance. Acquiescing in those rules of faith and practice, which were universally acknowledged, the followers of Jesus waited,

waited, in patience, till it should please God to grant them further light with regard to matters less clear and important. Then, the sum and substance of the Christian's faith was not entirely placed in the knowledge of mysteries, in purity of profession, and volubility of tongue, but chiefly in a conversation becoming the Gospel, spirit, and example of Christ.

Such was the state of things during that blessed period which was favoured with the presence of our Lord, and of his Apostles, and in which Dogmatism had no footing.

Short, however, was its duration. For, on one hand, the Jews, who had entered into the infant-church,

not

not being able to divest themselves entirely of those principles in which they had been educated, brought along with them that dogmatical spirit, and that aversion to other nations, for which they had always been distinguished. On the other hand, the Pagan philosophy (as we have already seen) soon introduced that passion for system, and subtle disquisition, which afterwards so much marred the simplicity of a religion designed, as for universal benefit, so for universal comprehension.

All these corruptions, the fruit of Dogmatism alone, of a desire to be wise above what is revealed, and of setting down men's own reveries as
the

the dictates of Supreme Wisdom, were greatly aggravated after the conversion of the Roman Empire. For, then, ease, opulence, and power allowed the human imagination free scope, and nourished the rage for dogmatizing. Then, creeds and articles of faith were multiplied without measure or bound. The most insignificant matters were rendered subjects of controversy: yet diversity of opinion became criminal. The salvation of men's souls being connected with every religious dispute whatever, the scales of Orthodoxy were immediately brought in; the different opinions were weighed; and all but one only being found wanting,

wanting, an anathema was denounced against the abettors of them. Hence, new creeds were continually invented, in order to comprehend every new point started for discussion. Expressions unknown to Scripture were devised, and additional authority given to human writings and decrees. The pure and artless religion of Christ became an art and profession; and what was principally designed for the regulation of the heart, was placed in the head alone; all which was deplorably remarkable in that period which succeeded the Nicene Council, and was agitated by the Arian tumults.

The

The evil, however, was (if possible) increased, when the barbarous Dogmatism of the Schools had introduced itself into the Church, and established its undisputed dominion. It altered the form and substance of Christianity. It broached, maintained, and established the most absurd and pernicious doctrines; and struck such deep roots, that it is not yet entirely eradicated from many of the purest Schools of Christian Science. For, what else do we find in the dogmatical writings of many Divines, but metaphysical and scholastic subtleties; but disquisitions more abstruse than useful; but comments and interpretations of Scripture, which

which darken, with the shade of specious Erudition, what they are employed to explain and illustrate?

This spirit of dogmatizing has particularly discouraged the study of the Holy Scriptures. Fond of *Systems*, or *Bodies of Divinity*, comprehending the whole compass of Religion, whether Natural or Revealed, it held these up as complete rules of faith and manners; and thus superseded, in some measure, the use of the Sacred Writings. For, while each Dogmatist found, in his own favourite *System*, the whole substance of Christianity, and every thing necessary to salvation; thought it criminal to dispute any article of it, and

tried

tried by its measure every religious opinion whatever; why needed he consult the Sacred Oracles—unless only with a view to prove the heads of his System by fit texts and passages? For this purpose, favourable ones only have often been pitched upon, others passed over in silence, and doctrines thus obtruded upon Scripture, not drawn from it.

We mean not to insinuate, that there are not many books of divinity, which, following the rules of right Reason, and the spirit of the Sacred Oracles, deliver the genuine doctrines and precepts of Christianity, and keep constantly in view the producing of a virtuous and holy life.

But,

But, from such works, Dogmatism, in the sense here annexed to it, is discarded as the bane of true Religion: nor will any one deny, that there are many of a contrary complexion, which have done much harm in the world; and have either produced, or fostered, a hundred absurd notions prevalent among Christians; and that these are written in the true spirit of Dogmatism.

Among other evils, that spirit has given rise to those direful dissensions which have torn asunder the Christian Church, and cast over Religion such a horrid and ferocious aspect. For, while almost every spiritual

community

community learnt, from it, to confine the Christian Church to its own pale, and to exclude all others from the way of salvation ; not content with that rule of faith left by our Lord and his Apostles, they set up others at pleasure ; and, having sanctioned them by ecclesiastical decrees, invested them with the force of Divine authority. Each Sect, thus, vindicating the purity of its own creed, as alone containing the sense of the Divine Oracles, and, of consequence, the only one to be tolerated, men exhibited the astonishing audacity of wresting his thunder from the Supreme, and hurling it at the

L

heads

heads of their fellow-men; nay, not content with destroying their bodies, they even consigned their souls to eternal tortures.—From this source proceeded tumults, irreconcilable animosities, cruel persecutions, long and bloody wars. What was designed, by Heaven, to be a mean of drawing more closely every human tie, and cementing society, was perverted into a mean of the dissolution of the one, and destruction of the other.

Both time and words would fail me, were I to enumerate all the calamities

calamities which have flowed from this source. For, so far is Charity (as our Saviour stated it) from being an invariable mark of Christians, that *theological hatred and spite* are used to denote the essence of malignity.

Moreover, about what, in general, has this dogmatical temper been employed? What have been the subjects of the warmest religious controversies? The essentials of Christianity, those points which have a direct influence on practice, and regard eternal salvation? By no means. The most insignificant questions, points which

might have been determined either way, without injury to the fundamentals of 'Religion, which had been much better passed over in silence, have been, on many occasions, the subject of the most furious altercation.

Of this one evident reason may be given, which also manifests a remarkable feature in the character of Dogmatism. For, since the things which either constitute, or are connected with, the essence of Religion are evident to all, and, of consequence, afford little room for cavilling; those who were stimulated by a passion for distinction,

or

or the desire of raising disturbance, found it necessary to devise some abstruse and intricate questions, which might exercise both their own genius and that of others, excite an immediate discordance of sentiment, and beget controversies *ad infinitum*. These matters, represented by those who broached them, as affecting the very vitals of Religion, drew off men's minds from the cultivation of true piety, and attached them to what had either none, or very little connection with it. While men, under the appearance of Religion, contended for what had so

little of its reality, it is no wonder that their actions corresponded with their principles, and that they committed crimes, and produced calamities, equally disgraceful to Religion and pernicious to mankind. Hence, Hilary of Poitou very justly observes, that “while
“ Divines disputed about words,
“ while they agitated vain and
“ doubtful questions, divided into
“ factions and parties, and devoted
“ one another to destruction, none
“ among them belonged to Christ;
“ the whole Church was rent in
“ pieces, and retained nothing Christ-
“ tian but the name.”

When

When we consider all these effects of the Dogmatical Spirit prohibiting the use of reason and free inquiry in religious matters, is it any wonder that mankind should have adopted as articles of faith the most childish follies, inconsistent reveries, unintelligible, absurd, and contradictory positions? that they should esteem as the most essential branches of practice, unmeaning forms, indifferent, nay, sometimes impertinent, customs; a respect for certain persons, places, and things; for certain fashions or colours of clothes; for certain motions or gestures of the body, casts



of countenance, or tones of voice ? Is it any wonder that we should find, from history and our own experience, that no opinion can be conceived so ridiculous, or so absurd, and no practice so unnatural and barbarous, that men will not embrace and cherish it, when clothed with the venerable name of Religion ? At all this, I repeat it, need we be surpris'd, when we consider how seldom men attend to the things themselves which they profess or observe, and how much they are determined by the occasion, manner, and circumstances in which they were originally presented to
their

their minds, and bespoke their concurrence? If they have luckily stumbled upon the Truth, very few are able to give any tolerable *reason of the hope that is in them*. Are they in the wrong? in vain you endeavour to convince them of it; for their eye does not fall upon the same object with yours. You propose to try the question by argument; but they have decided it long ago, upon far different grounds.

All this has been, and is, the effect of *dogmatizing* upon religious subjects; of assuming tenets without inquiry or proof; maintaining them with obstinacy, and deeming it
profane

profane to call them in question. And although the principle, upon which the Reformation proceeded, and by means of which it shook the bulky fabrick of Romish Superstition, was the undoubted right which all men had to examine and judge for themselves in religious concerns, it is still to be regretted, that it has not acquired, or preserved, its full force among Protestants themselves; but needs to be cherished and supported before it attain maturity, and exert its complete vigour.

While such have been the fatal effects of *dogmatizing* on religious subjects, is not its absurdity sufficiently

ciently manifest? For, what greater absurdity can be conceived, than to corrupt the purest religion the world ever beheld—than to counteract the most important interests of mankind—and to pervert the means of happiness into instruments of the greatest misery?



END OF PART II.

AN

ciously manifest? For what greater
 abundance can be conceived, than to
 corrupt the purest religion the world
 ever beheld—than to convert the
 most important interests of mankind
 —and to pervert the means of hap-
 piness into instruments of the greatest

10 EE 58

A N

E S S A Y, &c.

P A R T III.

A N



A N
E S S A Y, &c.

P A R T III.

*Of the Medium to be observed between
the Extremes of Scepticism and
Dogmatism in Religion.*

AS the end of all Speculation
should be the investigation of
Truth, and the advancement of
Knowledge, so the exposure of er-
rors and vices should lead to the
means of preventing, or correcting
them. With great propriety, there-
fore, the Teylerian Society has pro-
posed,

posed, as the conclusion of this subject, the medium to be observed between the two extremes above exploded. On this we now enter, and shall thus divide our discussion of it : One Section shall state the proper meaning of the question : another shall treat that branch of it which shall have been shewn to relate more immediately to ourselves : a third, that which relates to our conduct towards others. A concluding one shall contain some observations tending to facilitate the practice recommended in both cases.

SECTION

SECTION I.

Of the proper Meaning of the Question.

WHEN we inquire what is the proper medium to be observed in Religion between Scepticism and Dogmatism, two senses may be annexed to the terms. They may signify, How shall a person avoid these two extremes in forming, and maintaining, his own religious opinions? or, What is the most effectual and desirable method of discouraging the prevalence of either of these extremes in the world?

M

If

If the former sense be understood, then, the question will relate to the private regulation of our understandings and affections. If the latter, it will have in view institutions of a more public kind, whose influence extends over the whole community. In both of these senses, we now proceed to consider it.

SECTION

SECTION II.

*Of the Medium between Scepticism
and Dogmatism with Regard to
ourselves.*

SEEING one extreme infallibly
produces another, it is plain that
nothing can be firm, and durable, but
moderation, and a conformity to the
nature of things, which is consistent
in every part, and is immutable, like
the councils of Him who framed it.
An averſion, therefore, to either of
the extremes of Dogmatism or Scep-
ticism, far from leading to the other,

M 2

will,

will, in every sensible mind, prove a perpetual barrier against it. In proportion as an inclination to these extremes diminishes, in the same proportion will an attachment to rational principle, and to pure and undefiled religion, increase; to that wisdom which is from above, which is first *pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.*

Now, an attention to those characteristics of pure religion set down by the Apostle, will immediately discover to us that religious medium after which we are now inquiring. *Purity, peace, gentleness, easiness to be*

be entreated, are its ingredients. It is founded in the simple dictates of reason, in those primary truths of the being, attributes, and providence of God, which every serious and candid mind will acknowledge, when fairly and distinctly proposed to it; as also on those shining testimonies of a Divine original, with which the Christian faith is accompanied. Its soul is *peace and gentleness*, viewing with a benevolent eye the whole human race, and desiring to draw them only by the cords of love—which Scripture most beautifully and emphatically styles *the cords of a man*; that is, those ties by which alone the human heart is formed to be drawn.

Its temper is *easy to be entreated*; is ready to listen to every contrary opinion, and to be convinced, if it is well founded; and, if it has taken up just offence, willing to be reconciled. Mercy and good fruits are its effects. It directs Religion to its proper end—to the diffusion of happiness, and to the alleviation of misery here below, and to the advancement of eternal felicity above. Its attendants are impartiality and candour. It is a stranger to party spirit, supports no set of opinions any further than it is perfectly convinced of their truth and beneficial tendency, and has an utter aversion to every thing that favours of diffimulation,

lation, hypocrisy, and priestcraft.

It delights in the light of day, and loves to see its opinions canvassed; convinced that, the more they are understood, the more they will be relished by every judicious and candid mind.

A belief composed of such ingredients, resting on such foundations, and productive of such effects, will infallibly secure us against superstition and enthusiasm on the one hand, and against impiety, or religious indifference, on the other. Such religious sentiments, early imbibed, and carefully cultivated, will not fail to enlarge and expand the heart, to keep it open to every generous and

liberal impresson, and to attach it to religious liberty; at the same time they preserve it firm and unmoved in the belief of the true and unadulterated principles of Christianity, and, thus, for ever secure against the dangers of Scepticism. For, if we inquire into the causes which first led many modern Sceptics into infidelity, we shall find that these were the absurd religious tenets they beheld prevalent around them, or had been taught in their infancy. That this is the chief cause of infidelity in Popish countries, is an undoubted fact. And it is very natural it should be so. For, when people are taught a Christianity, which, when they

they come to the exercise of their reason, they cannot reconcile to their natural sentiments of God, and will not give themselves the trouble, or have not the opportunity, of acquiring juster notions of the case, they are easily induced to reject the Divine authority of such a religion.

While, in Roman Catholic countries, this effect has been produced by that ridiculous pageantry, ceremony, and nonsense, which degrade true Religion, the same has been occasioned by that gloom, austerity, and horror with which it is invested by some Protestants. Instead of drawing men by its native loveliness,
many

many seem to wish to frighten men away from Religion, as if to engross it wholly to themselves. This is acting a very irreligious and inhuman part, since it is obstructing the progress of the kingdom of God upon earth. For, if many Infidels had received, betimes, more rational, natural, and amiable ideas of Christianity, it is probable they might have admired and loved it, and thus been preserved for ever from the fatal rock on which they split.

In a word, the only medium, the only sure preservative against both a Dogmatical and a Sceptical Spirit, is the knowledge of the principles
of

of pure Religion, unsophisticated by the comments and inventions of men. But of this more fully in the next Section,

SECTION III.

Of the Means of discouraging both a Sceptical and Dogmatical Spirit in the World.

AS, the more that true Religion is understood, the more it will be relished and admired; as it can only be derived from two sources, Nature and Revelation; and as these are mutually dependent and connected;

neglected; it is of infinite consequence, that they be properly studied, and fully apprehended. If either of them is neglected or misunderstood, the other is immediately affected; and religious belief receives a shock, which may easily incline it to either of the extremes which it is our great concern, in this matter, to learn to avoid.

The first thing, therefore, we would recommend on this subject, is, that the principles of Natural Religion, on which Christianity is founded, and which are of infinite consequence for the right understanding of the Christian scheme, should be more commonly studied than they are.

One

One main end of the Christian Revelation, certainly, was to bring into a clearer light the Religion of Nature, which had been so miserably clouded by human ignorance and depravity ; to confirm it by more powerful sanctions ; and to diffuse it far and wide, delivered in a manner plain and simple, and accommodated to every capacity. The other grand object it has in view, is, to unfold to us the œconomy of God, in relation to the deliverance of sinful men from misery ; their restoration to his favour, and their exaltation to eternal glory and happiness.

Now, all this is evidently founded in the Divine perfections. Without
the

the knowledge of them, therefore, the œconomy of grace must be obscure and perplexed, nor can the mind ever acquire any just and consistent apprehension of it. To the want of this right apprehension of the Divine attributes it is owing, that people have often put such absurd interpretations upon Scripture. Incapable of forming any tolerable idea of absolute perfection, and supposing the Deity to resemble the human character, they have often made Scripture speak a language unworthy of God, and grounded upon it tenets, and modes of worship, both affrontive to him, and unprofitable to his creatures. Hence it so frequently

quently happens, that vicious conduct, and high pretensions to religion; that the most dogmatical austerity of faith, and the most dissolute practice, are found united in the same character.

The second source of Religion is the Holy Scriptures. On the study of them peculiar care ought, therefore, to be bestowed; and, in order to succeed in that study, it should by no means be begun with previous attachments to any system. The plain and natural meaning, according to the genius of the original languages, and the circumstances of the times in which the Sacred Books were written, should be investigated.

Scholastic



Scholastic jargon should be entirely exploded, and metaphysical refinement no longer grafted upon the simplicity of the Gospel.

In explaining Scripture, and in forming *Systems* of Christian Doctrine (which it were to be wished men had shewn less eagerness for), there is one distinction, which it would be of singular benefit to remember: I mean that of fundamental points, and those which are either indifferent or of small consequence. This distinction Scripture teaches us to make, and strongly inculcates the observance of. *The kingdom of God* (says the Apostle) *is not meats and drinks, but righteousness and joy in the*

the Holy Ghost. Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not into doubtful disputations. For, one believeth that he may eat all things, another who is weak eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth, despise him that eateth not; and let not him that eateth not, judge him that eateth: for God hath received him†.*

However just and scriptural this distinction, it is much to be regretted it has been so little observed among Christians. Let those doctrines, therefore, which Scripture unequivocally reveals be laid down as fundamentals. Let every other be

* Rom. xiv. 17.

† Ibid. xi. 3.

proposed with those marks of doubt with which the Word of God has characterised them, by leaving them in a certain degree of shade and obscurity, and be insisted upon as little as possible. The very words of Scripture, translated as nearly as the genius of each language will admit, should be used. By this mean, we shall guard against imputing to it doctrines which it does not contain, and making it speak ours, not its own language. It will also be productive of a very excellent effect with regard to the extremes now before us.

For, in the first place, it would guard men against Dogmatism, by rendering

rendering them less tenacious of less momentous points, on which they have always been most prone to dogmatize ; and give more firmness and vigour to the body of Religion, while it loosened its ornaments and appendages.

In the second place, it would give a severe check to the growth of Scepticism. For, Christianity, thus appearing in its primitive unsophisticated state, in which its doctrines, few in number, and of easy comprehension, stand the test of the strictest scrutiny, the Sceptic would have less exercise for his sophistry or wit. In Religion, Scepticism has aimed its severest blows at human comments

under the notion of Divine truths ; whereas it was combating a phantom of its own imagination, and pleased itself with the vain idea of laying prostrate the man of straw it had foolishly created.

Even with regard to fundamental truths, great care should be taken, not to think of imposing them violently upon others, or even of loading with opprobrious epithets those who reject them. It is not for men to arrogate to themselves that decision which belongs only to the *Searcher of Hearts* ; I mean, that of the future fall of their fellow-men. Since God himself allows the tares to grow

up

up with the wheat, to himself also he
reserveth the harvest.

Let not a weak, unknowing hand
Presume God's bolts to throw,
Nor deal damnation round the land
On each it deems his foe!

Indeed, I am convinced, that Chris-
tianity will never appear in its native
lustre, till the most perfect, unequi-
vocal toleration be every where esta-
blished; because this will allow Re-
ligion to exert its native energy, en-
joy the same advantage with every
other science, and, by means of free
inquiry, extracting fresh light and
evidence, bring it nearer and nearer
to the pure standard of Divine Truth.
Toleration, when properly under-

flood, maintains the purity of faith and practice. It exhibits charity and forbearance, the most lovely of Christian virtues, and the compendium of them all. It banishes dissimulation and hypocrisy, which, though the bane of Religion, have, by a strange fatality, lurked often under her cloke. It implies the firmest adherence to the words of *sound doctrine* as received from Heaven : for, in the first place, it supposes we are thoroughly convinced of the truth of our opinions, since we fear not to submit them to the freest scrutiny ; and, secondly, that we are firmly attached to them, because to bear with others necessarily involves a difference

a difference from them; for, if we are indifferent, there is on our part no toleration.

A tolerant spirit is, thus, the greatest bar both to Dogmatism and Scepticism; attaching us, on the one hand, to what we deem pure Religion, and, on the other, preventing us from imposing arbitrarily upon others our own tenets.

CONCLUSION.

*Some Reflections tending to facilitate
the Observance of the Medium above
recommended.*

I. **I**N order to secure us against both a Sceptical and Dogmatical Spirit, the first thing we would recommend is, To guard ourselves, as much as possible, against the influence of any ruling passion. By this mean we shall strike at one of the principal roots of both of these pernicious extremes. For the human mind is naturally fond of truth, unless

unless some vicious propensity, or some sectarian or party spirit, has rendered it an unwelcome guest. If, therefore, we desire to keep our minds open to the conviction of Truth, and to secure their most important interests, it behoves us to preserve their purity and integrity. While vicious habits, or prejudices, are not yet deeply rooted, nor the soul has given itself up to their decided empire, Truth easily finds her way to it, draws, by her native beauty, that attention which is not pre-engaged, and overcomes, by her captivating powers, those defects and errors which are not yet consolidated
into

 into a constitutional habit. Virtue, like health, gives to every object the just and pleasing colouring of nature; whereas Vice, like the jaundiced eye, tinges them with her own native die.

II. Another caution necessary to be observed on this subject, is, To be upon our guard against hasty and partial judgments.

Accidental circumstances entirely unconnected with the case, affociations of ideas incongruous to reason, or some distant, or only apparent analogies, frequently determine men on the most momentous concerns.

Some

Some hasty liking, or disgust, is often sufficient to fix them in error all their lives, and to prejudice them for ever against what could not have failed to conciliate their approbation, had they only given it a patient hearing. Some particular tenet, which they do not immediately relish, often indisposes them against a whole system. An aversion to particular persons is sometimes transferred to their profession. An opinion true when considered in a general light, is erroneously applied to every particular case; and a principle just in particular cases, is no less erroneously rendered general. It is thus men are deceived by appearances,

pearances, embrace Falsehood under the guise of Truth, and become Dogmatists, or Sceptics, according as their fancies have been first struck.

Since, then, narrow and partial views are such a fruitful source of error, a powerful mean of leading us to the middle point, where Truth resides, must be to suspend our judgment till we have examined, and to extend our examination to every circumstance and relation of the case.

Men would be much less apt to say,

Can any good come out of Nazareth?

would they only come and see.

To accustom ourselves to a habit of reasoning upon subjects, in the best manner we are capable, & in proportion to their importance & nature; cannot fail to prove of the highest advantage, to an earnest & careful

III. It would also be very necessary for the purpose in view, to entertain modest ideas of our own judgment, and to consider, that "to err is human." Pride is the mother of Obstinacy; and Pride, founded upon lofty ideas of our own understanding, produces an obstinacy the most inflexible of all. Hence, the recantation of an error is considered as so disgusting a step, as to make it appear preferable obstinately to persist in it, even after conviction. Hence, people often force themselves to maintain a conduct which they see to be wrong and absurd. To avoid ridicule, they become supremely ridiculous,

culous, and reject Truth for ever, lest they should seem to have rejected it at all. Next to the glory of being originally in the right, is that of seeing and acknowledging that one has been in the wrong.

All this folly and disgrace, a modest opinion of one's self would in a great measure prevent. It would prevent men from going to unjustifiable lengths, in the first place; and, if they had been unhappily carried too far, would still leave a door open for their coming back.

IV. Above all, we ought to make it one of our grand endeavours, to
keep

keep our minds open to conviction,
and to lay it down as a sacred point
of duty, to love Truth, and pursue it.
Should it oppose our passions, let us
reflect, it is only to deprive them of
their stings: should it contradict our
prejudices, it is only to dispel their
darkness: should it mortify our pride,
it is only to prevent our irretrievable
abasement: should it require any
sacrifice, it is only to compensate it
by a far greater advantage.

By these cautions, by vigorous
efforts, and by the assistance of God's
grace, ^(a) men will easily avoid the rocks
of Scepticism on the one hand, and

(a) most sincerely & devout.
ly prayed for,

of Dogmatism on the other ; will be confirmed more and more in the path of Truth, Equity, and Religion, enjoy its present peace and comfort, and be transported, in the end, to that fulness of joy in which it terminates.

T H E E N D.

10 FE 58

This Day is published,

Handfomely printed in One Volume, Small Octavo, Price
3s. sewed,

FEMALE TUITION :

O R,

An ADDRESS to MOTHERS on the
EDUCATION of DAUGHTERS.

London : Printed for J. MURRAY, No. 32, Fleet-Street.

Where may be had,

LETTERS from Baron HALLER to his
DAUGHTER, on the Truths of the Chris-
tian Religion ; translated from the German,
and beautifully printed on fine Writing Pa-
per, Small Octavo, 3s. 3d. in Boards, or 4s.
bound.

